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Tracking of sex offenders approved

Acting Gov. Codey is expected to sign the bill, along with ones on absentee voting and housing for the mentally ill.

By Robert Moran
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TRENTON - The state Legislature gave final approval yesterday to bills that would require satellite tracking of high-risk sex offenders, create a \$200 million housing fund for the mentally ill, and allow voting by absentee ballot for any reason.

Acting Gov. Richard J. Codey is expected to sign the measures.

The Assembly voted 80-0 to establish a \$3 million, two-year pilot program to monitor 250 sex offenders. More than 200 are deemed at the highest risk of re-offending. The other offenders who would be tracked are designated as moderate risk but are still a concern to authorities.

"The less we leave to chance in combating pedophiles, the greater assurance we have that children will be spared a tragic fate," said Assemblyman Douglas H. Fisher (D., Cumberland), a sponsor of the bill.

Under the legislation, a global-positioning-system device would be electronically tethered to an offender's ankle bracelet. The anklet would alert authorities if the GPS device was misplaced or ditched, or if the anklet itself was tampered with.

In Pennsylvania, Delaware County already tracks sex offenders with GPS, and Montgomery County expects to use GPS on a sex offender for the first time later this year. Legislation to mandate statewide satellite tracking of "sexually violent predators" is pending.

The New Jersey State Parole Board would oversee tracking, using both active and passive monitoring. The more costly active tracking continuously updates an offender's location. Passive tracking provides daily reports on the offender's movements.

The board estimates that 34 offenders would be tracked actively and 216 passively in the first year. In the second year, 70 would be tracked actively and 180 passively.

"GPS technology is a promising new tool, and New Jersey is creating an effective model for its use in this fight," Codey said.

Proponents say 24-hour monitoring would be helpful as a deterrent and sometimes useful in criminal investigations. GPS programs can include zones where offenders are prohibited, such as a prior victim's home or workplace. The programs can also create "inclusion" zones where offenders are required to be at certain times - at home, at work or at counseling.

"GPS technology will let officers know precisely where these individuals spend their time, and whether they are keeping away from the places they must keep away from," Codey said.

"It will let officers compare their movements to reports of new crimes, and it will help us prevent these crimes from happening again," he said.

While more than 200 sex offenders are categorized as high-risk in New Jersey, most are not under parole supervision because their crimes predate the tougher sex-offender laws of the 1990s. However, the bill would force the unsupervised high-risk offenders - now required only to register their addresses with police - to wear the GPS devices.

Another provision would allow the parole board to administer lie-detector tests to any sex offender serving lifetime community or parole supervision. Supporters said the provision was meant to help verify whether an offender was complying with parole requirements.

The Assembly also gave final approval to a measure that would create a \$200 million housing trust fund for people with mental illness and other special needs.

The bill, sponsored by Codey in his dual role as Senate president, would authorize borrowing the money to pay for the creation of 10,000 housing units over 10 years.

Codey, a longtime mental-health advocate, had introduced the idea in his State of the State address in January.

Advocates and people living with mental illness and other needs have testified to the difficulty of finding appropriate housing.

In April, the state was sued because a lack of housing and other services was keeping nearly 1,000 patients in psychiatric hospitals past their discharge dates - some for years.

Another measure headed to the governor would allow New Jersey residents to cast absentee votes without having to provide a reason why they cannot vote in person.

Proponents say voters want the option of absentee voting without having to provide a medical excuse or declaring that they won't be at home.

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